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Review of *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* by Seb Franklin (University of Minnesota Press)

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ABSTRACT *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* examines the convergence between the recursive function of value in capitalist economies and the functions of abstraction, ascription, and disposal that govern digital systems. Franklin argues that digitality's most pernicious effects are apparent in how digital systems create the illusion of frictionlessness, connectivity, and access, while at the same time working to reinforce a logic of exclusion that externalizes the material realities of depletion. Participation in value-mediated social relations has become mandatory due to the global reach and ubiquitous extension of the informational and economic systems under which workers labor. Race and gender are social categories which position marginalized workers, especially workers from the Global South, as unreliable components in the system, the digitally disposed. Franklin argues, using the study of communication systems, that this positioning is not a flaw of the system, but is rather the intentional effect of forms of capitalist accumulation that depend on the precarity of the lives of those who generate the labor that the system depends on. A valuable contribution to the study of digitality, neoliberalism, political economy, racial capitalism, and technological history, this work shows that the social effects of digitality are not new, but rather are an intensification of the exclusions and forms of marginalization upon which capitalism depends.

KEYWORDS capitalism, digital, informatics, information, neoliberalism, race

The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value. By Seb Franklin. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 266 pp. (Paperback) ISBN: 1517907152. US List: $27.00.

Seb Franklin's *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* is a book-length exploration of a provocative thesis: the value network that has shaped and guided several centuries of capitalist accumulation, in the West and globally, is the original iteration of the techniques of abstraction that have since proliferated as digitality. According to Franklin, while the abstraction of value in capitalist systems obfuscates its concrete implications, digitality openly declares its intended effect, which is to build virtual worlds and communication networks that govern and shape social, economic, and political relationships.

Part 1 of the book, "The Informatics of Value," introduces the theoretical framework that drives Franklin's analysis. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the origins of the formal study of communication and information systems in the work of Claude Shannon. Shannon's communication theory, as Franklin shows, positioned information as an abstract signifier that could easily move between different domains and that could be used to manage and control human labor. Chapter 3 uses Marx's concept of primitive accumulation to describe the processes that have extended the reach of capitalism's value system. Chapter 4 compares the way that communication systems create continuous connections from unreliable components with the way that the continuity of capital flows depends on the unreliable participation of laborers. Chapter 5 introduces a turn towards literary metaphor in the context of Samuel R. Delany's novel *Neveryóna*, which contains an extended discussion of a device that records patterns as flowing water leaves imprints on sand. Franklin characterizes this device as a perfect analogue of the process of communication: the medium, water, does not itself carry the pattern, but it can impose a pattern upon the sand. Similarly, complex political patterns, such as the value relation in capitalism, can be transmitted and reproduced through seemingly neutral processes.

Part 2, "Media Histories of Disposal," introduces additional concrete examples from history, art, and information theory. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are an extended discussion of prominent information theorist and inventor of the field of

cybernetics, Norbert Wiener. Franklin discusses the underrecognized racial politics of Wiener's work, particularly the racial character of the digital-liberal ideal subject and the complex racial associations which cohere in the category of the "digital native," frequently referenced in the work of Wiener and other prominent digital enthusiasts. Chapter 9 is a discussion of Sondra Perry's *Typhoon Coming On*, an art piece which interprets the horrors of the Middle Passage. Franklin argues that the art dramatizes relations of abstraction and exchange that underlie both racial capitalism and digitality. Chapter 10 is a discussion of inventor Charles Babbages's nineteenth-century complaints about street noise, which exemplify the homogenizing ideology of capitalist value. Chapter 11 is a discussion of the sociometry movement, popular in the early twentieth century, which attempted to encode and map the social behavior of humans. Finally, Chapter 12 is a discussion of conceptual similarities between the digital server and human servants.

Franklin emphasizes that the attribution of value within capitalism is always linked to correlated forms of disposal. Franklin defines disposal as a form of sorting and regulation that limits continuous access to the value network to those who are presumed lacking in the skills, resources, or social position to reproduce themselves homeostatically as ideal workers. Disposal works through complex processes of differentiation that reflect racialized and gendered positionings in the global economy. Diverging from traditional accounts of the worker/owner divide, Franklin argues that the subject positions of worker and owner within capitalism share a more invisibilized form of privilege: the ability to reproduce oneself homeostatically *as a subject* in the value network. The ability to either sell one's labor or to accumulate wealth results from having a subject position that can secure access to the value network; both workers in the global North and owners of capital share unattenuated access to the system of capitalist value.

While those with uninterrupted forms of connection to the value network can aspire to the ideals of transparency, frictionlessness, freedom, and even the aim

of transcending the material world, those who are excluded from this access face a different fate. Franklin describes such enforced precarity as affectability. To be affectable is to be exposed to the externalities that capitalism seeks to hide. The forms of deprivation and precarity associated with affectable existence have become difficult to escape as the value network continually exerts its global reach. Franklin convincingly argues that the transformations associated with neoliberal capitalism in the late twentieth century, including market deregulation, austerity, and the introduction of structural adjustment programs, contributed to the global consolidation of the value network. Further, the advent of digitality in the twentieth century can very plausibly be interpreted as a new yet consistent iteration of capitalism's informatic logic.

At times, Franklin's decision to interpret capitalist processes through the lens of information can seem generalizing. Franklin argues, for instance, that the position of marginalized people who exist on the outskirts of the information network can be compared to the role of noise in an information system. Franklin argues that information systems are designed to synthesize a reliable circuit from unreliable precursors which are marked by distortion and noise, just as the condition of people living outside of the value network is often marked by irregularity, chaos, and disobedience. This approach risks centering the informational metaphor at the expense of an examination of specific political conditions.

Additionally, Franklin's theorization of the concept of race at times strains to hold together two separate claims: first, that race is an abstraction deeply rooted within the value network that generates the dualism of transparency/affectability; second, that race references an array of material conditions that limit access to the benefits of capitalist value. As Franklin acknowledges, capitalist accumulation is always linked to concrete externalities that have racially differentiated effects. However, Franklin's methodological reliance on the work of other theorists at times stands at odds with the book's ambition to make a more empirical claim about how these processes unfolded in history.

The Digitally Disposed is a valuable contribution to an emerging body of scholarship that examines the connection between the digital infrastructures that have come to govern so much of our lives and the concrete political and economic effects of these technologies. This work has much to offer scholars of media studies, digital studies, neoliberalism studies, Marxist thought, race and gender theory, postcolonial studies, and political economy.

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